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ABSTRACT

Principals are ultimately responsible and accountable for all scheduled activities that are part of the school's program, including interscholastic athletics. Among their responsibilities are supervising athletic directors, treating coaches as teachers first and as glory-winners for the school second, maintaining responsible conduct among spectators at athletic events, helping student athletes keep their achievements and expectations in perspective, and protecting athletes from the unscrupulous recruiting practices of some colleges. (Author/PGD)

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THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORTS

Santee Ruffin

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INTRODUCTION

Most principals recognize the important role of interscholastic sports in high school extracurricular programs. They provide opportunities for thousands of young men and women to hone their athletic skills and to compete at a level that will allow them to reach their potential. Competition in sports teaches young people how to function within a team, how to develop inner strength, and how to win and lose gracefully. It also promotes a sense of self-worth.

Many educators and others, however, are wondering if we have a case of the tail wagging the dog. The tail being the interscholastic sports program and the dog being the teaching-learning program designed to meet the needs of the entire student body. While the overwhelming majority of school administrators, athletic directors, coaches, students, and parents believe that high school athletics should be kept in proper perspective, there are enough who do not choose to accept sound educational principles to warrant a frank discussion.

High school athletics have become as much a part of everyday school activities as the three Rs. Pep rallies, the Saturday afternoon football game in the fall, the Friday evening basketball game, state championship contests, and parades are part of the American way of life. A quick recollection of these activities usually generates smiles. However, in some communities, the smile would be hollow and would serve as a mask for those who are asking, "Where is this whole thing going? Who is in charge?"

PRIMARY AND ULTIMATE ACCOUNTABILITY

Although principals are not necessarily expected to be on the practice field, choose officials for a game, or order equipment, they are responsible and accountable for all scheduled activities that are a part of the school's total program.

Good principals are expected to delegate responsibility and authority, but accountability for what does or does not happen cannot be shifted. We must add that principals cannot execute their responsibilities with full accountability unless there are supportive policies from the school board and the superintendent.

THE PRINCIPAL AND THE ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

Athletic directors have, or should have, the total responsibility for coordinating sports programs and supervising their coaching staffs. It is not sufficient for athletic directors merely to order equipment, schedule events, and collect tickets. The director must also monitor teaching techniques, relationship with team, safety precautions, and overall decorum (which includes conduct during a contest). This supervisory function is quite similar to that which is performed in the classroom.

Athletic directors are experts in their field and should be held accountable for administering the athletic program in a manner that is in keeping with the school's and the school district's philosophies, goals, and objectives. Principals, however, have an obligation to supervise them to make sure their responsibilities are properly carried out. We do not suggest interference by the principal; rather, we suggest frequent monitoring so that the principal may be fully informed and provide assistance when necessary.

THE PRINCIPAL AND THE COACH

Coaches usually have their athletes' enthusiasm, willingness to learn, desire to win, and self-confidence in their hands. What coaches do with all this makes the difference. Coaches can fall short of winning a championship and produce a number of proud athletes who feel good about themselves and their participation. They can also win a championship and emotionally destroy some of the athletes. They should strive to get the best athletic performance out of a team or an individual, and perhaps produce championships, in a manner that increases the maturity of students and makes their participation worth remembering.

The relationship of principals with their coaching staffs should be identical to the relationships they have with other members of the teaching staff. A coach should be considered a teacher first and a possible winner of championships second.

No coach should feel above the system and capable of functioning independently. We recognize that some alumni associations and booster organizations prompt coaches to feel that they are capable of walking on water. When such situations develop, they must be corrected by the leader of the school—the principal.

The principal must not exert pressure on the coach to win. Almost everyone likes to win and bask in the glory that it brings. However, athletic success should be only a portion of the winning image a school desires to exhibit. A high school is primarily a learning institution that recognizes the importance of a well-organized and supervised extracurricular program.

Spectator Conduct at Athletic Contests

Obscene cheers, littering of basketball courts, the throwing of objects, and verbal indignities directed toward visiting athletes have no place in high school athletics. Unfortunately, such negative acts occur in some schools. Spectator participation at a school-sponsored event represents another type of learning experience that must be taught by school personnel. Students, visitors, and even parents must be made fully aware of what will and will not be tolerated at athletic events.

The reasons for these rules should be explained. Anyone who would question the need to quell the increasing amount of rowdy spectator behavior need only turn on the television set and watch some of the spectators attending college and professional sports events. The old axiom (paraphrased) should prevail—You have personal rights until your assumed rights interfere with the rights of others.

The Athlete and Athletic Achievement

Interscholastic sports are extracurricular; they are not substitutes for strong academic programs. The literature lists numerous cases of athletes who became the stars in their schools and towns and then received free rides in the classroom and the community. Little was expected in the classroom as long as they were making touchdowns, scoring baskets, or winning races.

Many of these athletes believed their press clippings and well-wishers and concluded that the world owed them something. They graduated because of the kindness and admiration of school staff members. However, many of them soon realized they had not acquired any skills; that they were deficient in reading, writing, and mathematics; and that they were unemployable. Their plight caused frustration, anger, and sometimes led to a life of crime.

Principals, coaches, and teachers should be committed to assisting athletes and all other students who participate in extracurricular activities, in keeping their athletic endeavors in perspective. They are students first and athletes second. Athletes should not be allowed to think that because of physical prowess they will coast through high school, walk into college on an athletic scholarship, and move on to become professional athletes. Recent figures indicate that less than two percent of college athletes go on to participate at the professional level. In addition, less than 50 percent of today's professional football players were granted degrees from the colleges and universities they attended.

Encouragement and proper counseling, yes. Pie in the sky dreaming, no! A simple question that can be asked of those athletes who choose to risk their futures on a dream is, "What will you be able to do as an adult if your athletic career ends tomorrow?"

The Principal and College Recruitment Practices

Principals, through their coaching staffs, have definite responsibilities to the high school athlete who is being recruited by college coaches. Recent exposés indicate many college coaches promise the star athletes everything short of the moon in order to get them to matriculate at their institutions. Too often these athletes who expect the world find:

- They live in a dormitory that segregates them from the rest of the student body.
- They don't get the car, the money, and the special treatment.
- They receive little or no counseling.
- Their four-year scholarships really exist on a year-to-year basis at the pleasure of the coach.
- They are prevented from taking more than 12 semester hours work during the sport season and, hence, are unable to graduate at the end of four years.
- No funds are provided to attend summer school or an additional school year in order to graduate.

- They are manipulated into taking easy courses that may not have any relationship to their career goals.
- Coaches merely view them as instruments to be used to bring glory and revenue to the institution.

A recent television show presented the plight of several athletes who had competed for four years at the college level. None of them graduated, some couldn't read, and they were unemployed or holding menial jobs.

High school principals and coaches should publicly expose the college recruiters who use less than honorable tactics and engage in what could be labeled athletic slavery. Currently, there are more than 20 colleges and universities on NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) probation for violating recruiting and financial assistance rules. Athletes and their parents should be able to receive sincere counseling and assistance from high school staffs as they choose institutions of higher learning.

The whole matter of alleged and documented abuse of athletes has prompted the establishment of an organization that addresses the issue. Called *The Center for Athletes' Rights and Education,* it has developed recruitment guidelines for principals, teachers, counselors, and parents:

Step 1. Upon receipt of 10 recruiting letters or calls, the high school coach should inform the school's principal that a particular athlete is being highly recruited.

Step 2. The principal shall take this notification as an opportunity to convene a meeting of the student-athlete, a parent or guardian, one teacher, a guidance counselor, and the coach.

Step 3. The guidance counselor shall draft a brief career plan based upon relevant tests, academic performance records, and conversations with the student and parent/guardian. The teacher shall draft a brief skill assessment focusing on remedial needs, tutorial assistance required, and the overall academic climate needed by the student-athlete for a successful college experience. The coach will rate the athlete's sports skills.

Step 4. A preliminary screening of the interested schools will be conducted based upon the academic, career, athletic, and social needs of the student-athlete as assessed by the committee.

Step 5. Each appropriate candidate school will be invited to make a presentation to the athlete through and in the presence of the committee. The presentation will address needs compiled in the

report. The committee will request that each recruiter put scholarship offers and financial aid information in writing.

Step 6. The athlete and at least one committee member will visit the college or university as the guest of the school.

Step 7. After several different visits, a choice should be made and the recruiter should be invited to attend the final committee meeting where the Letter of Intent should be signed.

The organization is to be commended for addressing the issue. However, high school personnel should not rely on other agencies to protect the interests of their students. The NCAA also offers *A Guide for the College Bound Student-Athlete*. It provides a summary of rules and regulations governing recruiting, eligibility, and financial aid.

What Does the Future Hold?

The redeeming qualities of high school athletics far outweigh the negative influences. However, secondary school principals, teachers, counselors, athletic directors, and coaches must take the steps necessary to keep interscholastic sports in perspective, providing opportunities for students to compete in a wholesome environment and to gain a level of maturity that will assist them in facing the challenges of life.

Public education is under severe scrutiny because parents and others are concerned about the curricular and extracurricular experiences being provided to young people. Interscholastic sports are viewed as frills by some. Those of us in the field recognize the need to retain these activities, but our charge is to conduct competitive sports programs in a fashion that brings added dignity to the profession.